Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 44 | Issue 2 Article 8

December 2015

Book Review: Schools for conflict or for peace in Afghanistan

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Burde, D. (2014). *Schools for conflict or for peace in Afghanistan*. New York, Columbia University Press. Hardback ISBN-978-0-231-16928-8; E-book ISBN-978-0-231-53751-3.

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Dana Burde's account of a reform initiative in Afghanistan, non-formal village community schools, is a timely contribution to research on education in that country. The main thesis is that external aid organizations should support education reform in Afghanistan, but must take care to do no harm. The first chapter provides a historical overview of modernization drives via state schooling that counterbalances traditional religious schools, and claims that flawed international educational aid often exacerbates conflict. Burde concludes that educational aid must thus respond to Afghanistan's interests and be evenly provided, and claims that community schools meet these stringent criteria by reducing conflict, supporting peace and legitimizing the state to its own people.

Chapter Two, Humanitarian Action and the Neglect of Education, critiques the belief that humanitarian assistance ought to solely relieve threats to life and limb and exclude educational aid as often socially divisive with great potential to exacerbate these threats, arguing that well-designed educational aid can positively contribute to peace. Chapter Three, Jihad Literacy, develops the argument against "negative" curricula that glorify some, and vilify other groups, even advocating violence against the other, citing examples of how revising negative curricula reduces negative stereotyping. Burde particularly criticizes the US-funded "J is for Jihad" primers developed for Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, as misuse of educational aid for external purposes, suggesting that these primers deepened divisions in Afghanistan's society, while pointing out the irony that these US-produced pro-Jihad primers are still in use in Taliban-controlled areas, but are now turned against the US and its supporters in Afghanistan.

Chapter Four, Education for Stability, expands the argument that programmes that do not target certain groups negatively can still be divisive if assistance is not accessible to all. US social stabilization strategy uses educational aid to create pro-government attitudes where it has weak support, but provides little or no assistance in other areas. Burde provides evidence that this approach decreased perceptions of government legitimacy in excluded areas and heightened resentment against groups receiving this aid, and concludes that this politically-driven educational policy decreases, rather than raises, social stability.

Chapter Five, Education for the World, discusses USAID-sponsored community schools in villages without state schools through case study of one programme implemented in Ghor province by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). To join the programme, a village must ask to participate, and provide teaching space and a teacher candidate, whom CRS trains in the state curriculum. Village mosques often provide both space and the teacher, the local mullah. Burde cites evidence of increases in enrolment, attendance, and achievement, particularly for girls, and lower vulnerability to violence than state schools, arguing their isolation and community connection deter Taliban attack. The final chapter, Education as Hope, concludes through real partnership among communities, village mullahs, NGOs, and the Ministry of Education, state education can touch previously unreachable communities and students.

Perspective on the book and the community schools of Ghor can be gained by applying the 4 'A's rights-based education framework (access, availability, acceptability and adaptability). Community schools have clearly increased access and availability by reducing distance and cost

as general barriers to participation. Location in the village also increases acceptability of education for girls by reducing concern for their security, a major barrier to their school attendance. The book does not discuss teachers' training and practices or local stakeholders' perspectives, which could help readers gauge how locally acceptable and adaptable the curriculum is and how teachers integrate local knowledge and national curriculum and reconcile religious and state education.

External project funding has ended and the Ministry of Education has closed some schools in favour of a central 'hub' school. This reversion to the status quo has already led to decreases in participation, especially of girls. Consequently, Burde concludes by asking whether community schooling in Afghanistan should be seen as a temporary expedient to be phased out quickly, or as a permanent strategic component of Afghanistan's education. While Burde's stand-alone case study provides suggestive evidence in support of community schools as a major component of equitable education in Afghanistan, it is not enough to answer this question decisively.

Placed within a broader context of theoretical and comparative findings of other cases, the book's argument would be more persuasive. Readers would be interested in how Ghor's community schools compare with other initiatives in Afghanistan, such as home school programmes, and community school programmes in other provinces. How community schooling is adapted to Afghanistan's ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, for example, to Ghor's (and the country's) nomadic population, is also of great significance. Lack of recognition of languages besides Dari and Pashto can also create resentment, especially among large groups like the Uzbeks, who seek a federalized Afghanistan with greater local control of education. While Burde sees the state curriculum as fairly neutral, it may retain bias against females and rural communities; thus linking the book to external research that argues for community schooling for indigenous communities and rural students in developing contexts, especially girls, and for reducing urban bias by localizing curriculum in place-based rural education would further strengthen its argument.

Burde has provided a thought-provoking argument for the establishment and maintenance of community-based elementary schools in Afghanistan's villages as a means to provide education for all, especially girls, in contexts where state schooling had had barely any effect. Under assumptions of the superiority of centralized urban education, there is little place for the strong local participation seen in Burde's study, and the long-term outlook for community schooling would seem cloudy. Yet taken together with other research, *Schools for conflict or for peace in Afghanistan*, is a significant contribution to the argument for community schools as necessary for sustainable quality education for all in rural Afghanistan.